



The Ashes of Waco : An Investigation

Dick J. Reavis

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The scene outside Waco, Texas, on February 28, 1993 - when dozens of federal law enforcement agents in full combat gear stormed the Branch Davidian compound - could have been cast in England before the Quakers and Pilgrims fled to America, or in the colonies at Salem, or in the new Republic during the nineteenth century, when descendants of the Quakers and Pilgrims turned their suspicions on the early Mormons. The elements that these very American crusades had in common were, on one hand, a group of people with beliefs incomprehensible to the majority of the population, and on the other, police agencies whose operatives could not distinguish custom from law, idiosyncrasy from threat. The line between churches, which Americans believe should be protected from government interference, and cults, which most Americans hold in disdain, has nothing to do with the Constitution-the First Amendment in theory shields both-and everything to do with the prejudices of a nation that has grown fearful of the diversity that made it unique. The residents of Mt. Carmel were instantly convicted of sin and lawbreaking by the kind of gossip that unites remote hamlets and electronic villages alike.

This is the story the daily press didn't give us, the definitive book about what happened at Mt. Carmel, near Waco, Texas, examined from both sides-the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) and the FBI on one hand, and David Koresh and his followers on the other. Dick J. Reavis points out that the government had little reason to investigate Koresh and even less to raid the compound at Mt. Carmel. The government lied to the public about most of what happened - about who fired the first shots, about drug allegations, about child abuse. The FBI was duplicitous and negligent in gassing Mt. Cannel - and that alone could have started the fire that killed seventy-six people.

The press only made things worse. The feds said that Koresh and his cult held dangerous beliefs as well as dangerous guns, and the press passed on the charge without criticism or independent judgment. Its stories set up a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy in which the accusation - heresy - both predicted and justified the sect's demise, as if every Jeremiah were a Jim Jones, every Mt. Carmel inevitably a Jonestown.

Drawing on interviews with survivors of Koresh's movement (which dates back to 1935, long before Koresh was born), on published accounts, on trial transcripts, on esoteric religious tracts and audiotapes that tell us who Koresh was and why people followed him, and most of all on secret documents that the government has not released to the public yet, Reavis has uncovered the real story from beginning to end, including the trial that followed. It is a story about the very American, nineteenth-century roots of Koresh's theology, and it includes previously unpublished biographical details. Reavis quotes from Koresh himself at great length to create an extraordinary portrait of a movement, an assault, and an avoidable tragedy.

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